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SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST AND NOBEL LAUREATE WOLE SOYINKA
ON NIGERIA TROUBLES

¶1. (S) Summary: Leading democracy activist, Nobel Laureate and Niger Delta mediator Wole Soyinka met with Ambassador December 23 at his home in Ogun State to discuss the state of affairs in Nigeria ranging from President Yar'Adua's health and his fears on election reform to his role as a negotiator with the fractional umbrella militant group MEND. Soyinka said he respected Yar'Adua, thought he tried to do the right things, but was hampered by his inability to control the politics around him. He added that he was not hopeful that the Niger Delta Amnesty, planned rehabilitation programs for the militants or election reform would succeed without Yar'Adua's presence. He too had heard that the President was totally incapacitated. Soyinka said he was working with civil society organizations (CSOs) to find a way for peaceful disobedience and for the moment CSOs have decided on May 29, 2009 (annual celebration of Nigeria's Democracy Day) as a day time for a peaceful march on the National Assembly to force action on election reform. Soyinka also believed the election time table would be moved up at least to February ¶2011. However he saw no trends or had no indications from his sources that worried about a coup, as the "military has been burned by its past." On the removal of the chairman of INEC Soyinka said the President told him that he could not yet find a way around Senate President Mark on this issue. End Summary.

2.(C) Famed democracy activist, Nobel Laureate and Niger Delta negotiator Wole Soyinka agreed to meet with Ambassador on December 23 at his country residence in Ogun State just prior to his departure to California. Ambassador had known and worked with him nine years ago. Soyinka provided his honest assessment on the current democracy issues in Nigeria, and provided a debrief of his last meeting with President Yar'Adua prior to the latter's departure to Saudi Arabia for failing health which included discussions on Niger Delta and election reform. He began by saying that he had informed Yar'Adua that the country really needed a constitutional assembly to address key constitutional issues for Nigeria once and for all.

Meeting with Yar'Adua: Niger Delta

¶3. C) Soyinka said he first had a group meeting with Yar'Adua and the Niger Delta militants at the Villa in early November, followed by a one-on-one meeting. In the group meeting with the militants he said the Nigerian President was very forthcoming and responded to the concerns of the militants. Many of them felt that they were being used by the local politicians in the regions and that their stipends were being stolen and or inflated to cover

corruption. They stressed to the President that they were committed to rehabilitation/reintegration, wanted to ensure proper distribution of oil derivations, but they did not see any movement on the GON side. Soyinka stated that Yar'Adua was disturbed by these reports and stated he was committed to getting the rehab and reintegrating programs up and running. The President had promised to chair a townhall meeting with stakeholders on these issues, but unfortunately fell ill prior to the follow-up session.

14. (S) On the militants, the democracy activist said Q4. (S) On the militants, the democracy activist said that they were a "mixed bag, with some of them being intelligent, highly motivated and wanting dialogue, while others were uneducated." He added that the GON was making a mistake if it assumed that they were all "extortionists and killers." Soyinka added that Yar'Adua's proposal for a stakeholders town hall meeting was to put more transparency in the process and encourage improved dialogue among the international oil companies (IOC), the militants, and other community stake holders, particularly on how the IOC's can contribute to the rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Overall, Soyinka believed that the Niger Delta process will be stalled without the President and he was not hopeful that the Yar'Adua would return to Nigeria after this latest health crisis. He said that the President's wife Turai had returned to Nigeria to give "appearances" that Yar'Adua's health was improving. The government is in disarray with each minister doing his own thing," he concluded.

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The VP and Election Reform Issues

15. (S) On Vice President Jonathan, Soyinka said that the VP was "afraid of the military and to exercise power even in areas where he has expertise." The Nobel Laureate added that now could be a time for Jonathan to call for national unity and use his knowledge of the Niger Delta region to make rehabilitation and reintegration a reality for the area. He said he had not spoken to the VP and there was no reason to do so. In response to Ambassador's question on election reform, Soyinka said that he was not hopeful that the GON would push for changes in the absence of the President. He added that Yar'Adua was the only real driver on election reform. Others in the government do not want election reform and will "deliberately" stall until the very end. The democracy activist said he asked the President in his one-on-one meeting which followed the larger Niger Delta session what "hold INEC Chairman Iwu had on him that he could not find a way to fire him." Soyinka claimed that Yar'Adua said he had tried to work with Senate President Mark to call for a two third National Assembly vote on Iwu, but Mark refused. Mark likes things just they way they are and is supporting Iwu, Soyinka said. He noted that he had been engaged with civil society and helping them with their frustrations on the election reform issue. He noted that there is discussion regarding a peaceful march on the National Assembly on the anniversary of Nigeria's democracy day, May 29, 2009, to call for election reform.

16. (S) On whether or not he thought the country was ripe for a military coup; Soyinka said no. He added that the military is aware of its bad history in this country, and their negative past leadership, therefore he doubts that they would step in to mount a coup, noting that his sources are telling him there is thus far no tendency in that direction. Soyinka stated, however, that he thought the military would actually support the CSOs peaceful march on the National Assembly to try to push election reform,

and could likely join in the march. The other thing the CSOs are considering is starting a petition to remove Iwu from office.

Who are the Northerners?

17. (S) Ambassador asked Soyinka about who he saw as potential northern leaders to step into the VP slot if Jonathan moved into the Presidency. The democracy leader said he thought there were three northern cliques which were: the old guard comprised and led by General Aliyu Mohammed, which resents Yar'Adua, includes the Emirs, former President's Abdulsalami and IBB, and Abdu Yusuf, former head of service under OBJ; the Yar'Adua Katsina clique, which has now split in two, with a group led by Katsina Governor Shema, and the other by Agricultural Minister Ruma, which includes the two governor son-in-laws from Bauchi (Yugudan) and Kebbi (Dankagari); and, the third group comprised of younger governors and businessmen which includes Kwara Governor Saraki, businessmen Dangote and Mongul, and the Attorney General, with ex-Delta governor Ibori, ex-River Governor Odili footing the bill. On the Katsina group split, Soyinka said the two groups get played off against each other by Yar'Adua's wife Turai, depending on what she wants at any given time. On the Sarakis, both Kwara Governor Bukola, and his father Olusola, although Muslim, are not respected by the old northern guard, and not considered part of their clique. Others he considers with strong followings are Kano Governor Sheraku, former President Buhari, and former PDP Chairman Ogben during Obasanjo's second term.

Comment

18. (S) Soyinka is considered a respected interlocutor by many CSO groups and now by the Niger Delta militants. He paints a pessimistic future with no progress on election reform or the Niger Delta with Yar'Adua out of the picture.

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What was surprising given his public and vocal criticism of the current government was his respect for President Yar'Adua. He described him as a man who really wanted to do the right thing, smart, but had two Achilles heels: his health; and, not enough political clout with Nigeria's complex environment to get things done. Even when Ambassador asked about the money trail Yar'Adua has with ex-Delta Governor Ibori, he said it was unfortunate that this was the only way he could survive. We know that CSOs are prepared to fight for election reform, and we are working with them on a number of fronts as well as to build their capacity to monitor the election reform progress. The news that the CSOs may be planning a more collective action with the National Assembly is new information, and we will monitor this as well through our civil society contacts.

SANDERS